THE PRE-WAR ATMOSPHERE

Do Kh.

He comes home. The blue light on the answering machine flickers silently, a message from his wife: "I'm drinking with friends at the Olive Garden in Brea. Do you want to come down for dinner? It's 6:30. I'll call back in a bit." "Brea" in Arabic means "empty valley," but is transformed in Spanish into "tar." The southern Californians in Orange County are a tolerant bunch. When he arrived, the county was still undeveloped: orange groves, oil rigs, yellow grass. But there were bulldozers everywhere, paving new streets. Okay, so a word can mean both empty valley and tar. The titters behind his wife's voice on the answering machine put him in a festive mood. He goes into his room to change.

By the time she calls back, he is dressed up and rereading a few pages of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*. Philip Marlowe is drinking a gimlet at Victor's.

"I was living that year in a house on Yucca Avenue in the Laurel Canyon district. It was a small hillside house on a dead-end street with a long flight of redwood steps to the front door and a grove of eucalyptus trees across the way."

A gimlet is half gin, half lime juice, with a few

drops of angostura and syrup. He asks his wife:

"What you drinking?"

"I'm drinking a Bloody Mary. You coming to eat? My friends want to leave."

"Do you know how to mix a gimlet?"

"No."

"Do they have gimlets there?"

"How would I know?" His wife, noticing his roundaboutness, suggests, "All right, I'll come pick you up. Do you want to eat Japanese?"

Why Japanese? he thinks.

His wife says:

"You think about it. Wait for me."

His wife shows up, thinking he knows not what. Marlowe is easy: The man's loyal to one drink, at least for a story.

"From then on it got to be a habit with him to drop in around five o'clock. We didn't always go to the same bar, but oftener to Victor's than anywhere else."

Without knowing why, he demands:

"I want to eat Lebanese."

"You want to eat and watch the belly dancer?" His wife asks.

"Belly dancing?"

"Hassan in Newport Beach. All my friends say it's a good place to eat."

"Which friends, American or Lebanese?"

"American."

He looks at his wife.

"American friends, I wouldn't trust them."

His wife agrees.

He continues:

"You're Lebanese but you let Americans tell you where to eat your own food."

His wife shrugs. Unlike the Vietnamese, the Lebanese are not passionately attached to their homeland. They don't have a beef soup to haunt them—raw or well-

done with its clear broth, a peeled onion, a raw egg. Perhaps his wife is unusually indifferent. There were times, watching the news on TV, when he would say, "Hey, there's fighting in Beirut," and his wife would respond, "Oh, really?" Maybe this is why the Lebanese have assimilated quickly and gained powerful positions in their adopted countries. Philip Habib as Special Envoy, for example, or John Sununu as White House Chief of Staff. Not to mention someone whose name he can't remember who is president of a small country in the Caribbean.

"I don't like to watch belly dancing." He could conjure up scenes from Egyptian movies, "They jiggle their bellies right at your table. It makes me uncomfortable."

His wife laughs:

"You are uncomfortable with everything. It's Friday night, there's belly dancing everywhere, including Indian restaurants."

Belly dancing even in Indian restaurants, all because it is such a popular feature in America, a kind of aerobics, with appeal for Americans, not Indians. He says:

"That's all right. I want to eat Lebanese."

The Gondole restaurant is on Lincoln between Dale and Beach, which is closer to where he lives than Newport Beach. "I've never noticed it. Did you bring the address?" He wife slows down the car.

"2700 or 2800 West."

He vaguely remembers, looking right and left at all the signs shining on the dark street. A gas station, fried chicken, an apartment complex, pizza, waterbeds, Indian grocery store ("How come so many Indians are named Patel?" he wonders), a mobile home park ("Now Renting"), a sushi restaurant and a California Sun Tan outlet.

"Here, on this side," he points.

Gondole Club/Restaurant.

The strip mall's architecture has the feel of a New England town; its bell tower resembles the spire of a small-town church. The wooden wall has turned blue under the

neon light. The parking lot is empty, dark, cozy, except for a dimly lit "For Lease" sign. This complex is relatively new. The two cloth screens shielding the entrance to the sushi place flutter. California Sun Tan, right next door, must be hurting for business. April's temperature has unexpectedly reached the record-breaking 100°s. One could go mad sitting in a car: Who would want to go into a salon and lie under a Light Bulb Beach?

The Gondole Restaurant claims the end spot. He has to look carefully at the image on the glass to detect a sinuous woman holding a scarf above her head. First the spire, now the stained glass. "Gondole" is spelled out in big letters. Driving by, he used to think it was an Italian restaurant. And the image of the dancing woman he had mistaken for a gondolier: a guy in a black hat singing bel canto in front of San Marco, not a belly dancer untying the scarf around her stomach to flutter over her head. Why would an Arabic eatery be called "Gondole"? He notices the small letters, "Lebanese Cuisine," on the side wall and the Arabic script over the door.

"What does that say?" he asks his wife.

"*Al Gondole*."

"Oh."

The name makes sense if you think about it. Venice is part of the East. Actually, the East begins in Venice. Beirut is right on the other side, the next stop on the spice route. It is both the entry to the Arabic peninsula and the gateway to Europe. Separated by a bit of tranquil sea, the Mediterranean, Europeans who come to Venice already feel they are entering the East. On both ends are doors, with the Mediterranean a nondescript and neutral hallway. So an Arabic eatery in Orange County, the new Byzantium, can be called "Al Gondole." There's nothing irrational about it.

They enter.

He sees, from afar, the promised belly dancer. "Wednesday to Saturday, belly dancing with live Arabic

music." A young waiter, tall, with an actor's good looks, leads them to the end of the room. On a platform hugging the wall is a long row of couches, arranged in several Us. Each has a table at a height about halfway between a dining room table and a coffee table. They settle down, half sitting, half lying. The rest of the row is already filled with diners. Beneath where they're sitting, the regular tables and chairs are unoccupied. At the back, in front of a shimmering, multicolored, gold-threaded curtain, is a blond dancer in a Haroun el Rashid harem costume. He leans back and stares at the soft ceiling, made of silk or brocade to resemble the tent roof of a nomadic sheik—very clever, but there's no atmosphere yet, in spite of the dancer's exertion at the back of the room.

"This ceiling reminds me of the Indian restaurant," he tells his wife.

The Indian restaurant was near the ocean (everything was near the ocean in Beirut), with a cloth ceiling that resembled the interior of a tent. It was hot there also—the night before Zouheir Moshen was killed. That day, the Arabic waiter asked him which wine he preferred, French or local. Tonight he wants a Lebanese wine but cannot find one on the menu. There are only Lebanese beers, and European or American wines. Although there are many fine California wines, he doesn't have a clue about them. They had even sold them at Hediard in Paris. Eating Tex-Mex in Bastille, the fancy crowd in the City of Lights would swear by Napa Valley and Sonoma.

"You want another long drink?" he asks.

"I just drank two Bloody Mary's. A Bloody Mary at the Olive Garden is like this," his wife measures about twelve inches with her hands. "You should drink an Almaza beer."

In Beirut he only dared to drink Almaza in the cheap joints. In the Hamra district, at Express or Café de Paris, he would follow the crowd and drink Heineken. He wonders if they know how to make a gimlet here like they do at the bar at the Ritz Beverly Hotel?

The waiter returns and asks courteously:

"Would you like something to drink?"

He hesitates, flips the menu back and forth and turns to his wife several times for help. It is hopeless. Waiters are different everywhere. In France, they are solemn and attentive. In the States they're eager and in your face. This guy is Lebanese. He's got a Middle East refinement and deserves the title "maitre" (the Lebanese call a waiter "maitre," a French word, the same word the Vietnamese use for a lawyer). He glances at "Louis Fuisse, Louis Jadot, $39." He blurts out:

"Mateus Rose,"

Then exhales. Oh well, Mateus Rose, a Portuguese wine. The maitre leaves. His wife looks over:

"Pouilly Fuisse," she reminds him.

"I know, 39 bucks," he replies.

He's not picky. You save 20 bucks going from Maconnais to Minho. Muscat from the Douro is a pretty good black gamay from the Saône. Yet the price is less than half. The waiter comes back, fussily shows him the bottle and lets him sniff the cork, which embarrasses him a little. A *vin de table* without a proper name and this guy is making a fuss. He tastes and nods his frugal head, like the night he drank the local wine in the Indian restaurant on the Lebanese hills. He feels love for his wife. The next night Zouheir Mohsen died.

There is no atmosphere at that point. A single belly dancer does not make the Middle East.

"This one can dance," his wife enthuses earnestly.

He turns his body halfway and awkwardly watches the blond American rhythmically flash the flesh around her belly button. At the entrance, he had carefully studied the black and white photograph without detecting anything Arabic about her other than the "Thousand and One Nights" outfit. "Her name is Chadia," he mumbles, "but I'm sure she's American."

Chadia, pausing at each table to wiggle her body, is

coming near. At the next table, two American couples become rowdy and wave dollar bills in the air. One fun-loving guy is trying to insert money into her cleavage while his girlfriend, legs on the couch, laughs hysterically. Chadia evades him adroitly, "Not allowed, not allowed," but she sticks her hip out so he can tuck money into the elastic hem of her pants. The guy, bewildered, shoves the money to his girlfriend under the table so she can tip for him.

"If you think she's good, give her some money. Here she comes."

His wife laughs, "If you don't like it, turn away; she'll leave automatically. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I don't like it," he says adamantly.

Sometimes life's more simple than you think. Chadia comes to their table, wiggles moderately a few times, then really does leave. Maintaining his sullen look, he exhales audibly.

"I know how to tip at go-go bars," he says apologetically. "A dollar is easy to figure out."

"You can tip whatever you want here. What's the difference?"

"I'm used to nude dancing. I'm not inhibited by it. This is your culture; you deal with it."

"Culture nothing. Belly dancing represents the sexual act."

Of course it's culture: human elaboration. A dog will represent the sexual act more simply, without ostentation. He goes on:

"People will belly dance at a political rally. I've seen them do it to 'Che Guevara in Gaza.' "

And he had seen it. At the Mutualite Theater in Paris, when Marcel Khalife was performing, some women in the audience left their seats, tied keffiyehs around their hips and danced in the aisles. The girl who was with him clapped along, her shoulders bobbing—a sexual act or *hasta la victoria sempre*? Since Chadia has gone to the dressing room, he feels genuinely safe. His wife says:

"Politics, sex, same difference. You can turn

around now." He turns around and notices, under the flickering oil lamp, a little sign on the table: "$15 minimum after 10 o'clock." Perhaps the main program only begins after 10 o'clock. The blonde with the Chadia moniker was only an opening act.

"I only know how to tip nude dancers," he is still embarrassed.

The sun was very hot. Big patches of his shirt stuck to his back uncomfortably.

"The stretch of broken-paved road from the highway to the curve of the hill was dancing in the noon heat... A thin hot acrid breeze was blowing. I had my coat off and my sleeves rolled up, but the door was too hot to rest an arm on."

His wife, hair tied behind her ears, smiled at him from the sidewalk.

"Where you going?"

His wife wasn't his wife at that point.

"I was browsing in Antoine's."

"You want to go get a drink?"

"I just had a drink with a friend."

He pointed to his Japanese friend. This guy was not really a friend. They had just had a drink. He met the guy on the street—he's Asian, the other guy's Asian—and they had a drink. He said, "You live here?" The other guy said, "No, you live here?" He said, "No." The other guy said, "I'm taking the bus to Baalbeck later. Want to come?" He said, "Yes, I was planning on taking the bus to Baalbeck."

"I'm going to Mövenpick for ice cream," his wife said.

He looked at the Japanese guy, who saw that he had met a local girl and was talking to her in French on the sidewalk—not a promising sign. Sometimes life's more simple than you think. The other guy split voluntarily.

"I'm taking the bus to Baalbeck."

"Yeah, you go," he said. "I'm going with you to

Mövenpick for ice cream," he said to his wife.

His wife smiled; the Japanese guy left. This guy he would never meet again; Baalbeck he would never see; his wife is still his wife today and the ice cream in Mövenpick was nothing to talk about. His wife is still his wife and the two of them are drinking cheap Mateus Rose, eating mez and waiting for 10 o'clock to see what the next attraction is.

Most of the American patrons left after the belly dancing act that had embarrassed him. The place is filling up with Arabs. At the next table are two sisters, who appear to be waiting for somebody, each drinking a Coke and not saying much. There is no one on stage. On the cassette player is a quiet tape by Magda Al Rumi.

"This girl's young. She's of Mona Mar'achli's generation," his wife says.

"I don't know her."

The young ones he doesn't know. There are famous songs he knows the melody of, and there are some he can sing along so people can laugh. Even with his bad pronunciation and his out-of-tune voice, he still likes to sing. Nothing could be funnier than the time they returned to Beirut. His wife was curious about a sign in Arabic: "Air wa Bic," which means "prick and Bic." Who wouldn't be startled? It took a long time before his wife could figure it out. It was an Arabic transliteration of "aerobic." His father has also been confused arriving in Hong Kong. Everywhere was the word "Si Da" that was nowhere to be found in the dictionary. The old man was told that it was the Chinese transliteration of the English "store." Drug Si Da, Department Si Da, Thrift Si Da, Jane Fonda Air wa Bic. World civilization has become homogenous from Beirut to Fragrant Harbor. In his conceited attempt to sing in Arabic, he's sure to create similar monstrosities. Still he likes to sing.

"Why don't they put on Fairuz?" he asks vaguely.

That night, there seemed to be only Lebanese in the roof-garden of the hotel in Limassol. The poolside

band played a Fairuz song. He was eating *creme de mais* soup like he had as a child at the Bel Air restaurant in Vũng Tàu. Limassol also looked into the ocean. In front of him, the Coke sign in Greek flashed behind City Hall. Farther away, the white waves in the Mediterranean flickered dimly like short-circuited neon lights. The violinist's trembling mustache accompanied the dolorous strains of "Old Jerusalem." Jerusalem Al Khots. It was his first opportunity to hear this melody. The sad tune meandered through the night. There was also a small lamp on their table, shaped like a candle. His wife recounted:

"In 1967, we were let out of school a month early. I stayed home to paint the lightbulbs blue to prepare for the airplanes at night."

He looked around. At each table in the roof-garden the conversation was restrained and polite. Everyone kept his voice low: too loud and they could hear you in Lebanon. It was only across the water, a ten-hour trip by the slow boat plying the Mediterranean. Once it had been Lebanon of the pine-covered hills, of redwoods on summits of cloud-covered mountains—the Switzerland of the Middle East. But Lebanon had turned into pillars of smoke choking the night sky, and Beirut was no longer a city of blue lightbulbs. That kind of air defense had been more romantic than the present system of using SAM missiles. He never heard of children staying home from school to paint SAM missiles bright pink or lemon yellow. Back then, his wife had painted lightbulbs night-blue, ocean-blue and Prussian blue. At Beirut's Khalde airport, the motley alliance of Palestinians and Lebanese Nationalist troops were holding out against Israeli paratroopers and the elite Golani armored brigade. The evening news announced that the Israelis had cut off the International Highway at Dar El Baidar. Syria's slow-footed 85th brigade was stuck in the city. In the roof-garden, he heard no conversation about the war. The Greek/Cypriot band only grieved over the Allenby bridge. He chuckled: "I've just found that pre-war atmosphere."

Perhaps this special commodity is also available in Orange County. One does not have to take refuge in a roof-garden of a beachside hotel in Cyprus in order to find it. A popular item, he sees it advertised everywhere. The pre-war atmosphere has no definite time span. The Lebanese civil war officially began in April 1975, after a busload of Palestinians got shot up on the unlucky 13th in Ain El Remaneh. To his wife, the pre-war era was before she had to paint lightbulbs blue.

"First Thursday of each month, I would go to my maternal grandmother's to listen to Radio Cairo. The whole Arab world would tune in to Radio Cairo on the first Thursday of each month to hear Oum Koulsoum's new song."

He doesn't like Oum Koulsoum. He has never responded to this ancient, robust woman in black-framed glasses with a kerchief in her hand. On the stage at Gondole, four guys in bow ties are cautiously launching into a melody. It must be one by the musical goddess. The French cultural minister, Jack Lang, in talking about her, had said: "Her voice is a thousand years old or more." He has never liked Jack Lang. But he does like his wife.

"People would smoke hashish, everyone got high—an idle lot. But the only time there was such a thing as an 'Arab Nation' was when a new song by Oum Koulsoum played on the first Thursday of every month."

He looks at the four mustachioed guys in the band and tries to envision Oum Koulsoum, the mythical lover of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Hero of Suez Canal, a thousand-year-old voice, a unified Arab Nation from Riyadh to Tunis, from Baghdad to Tripoli. First Thursday of every month they all fidget with the dial to catch Radio Cairo. Yes, an idle lot—what's so terrifying about them? When Oum Koulsoum went to Libya to perform, young soldiers loyal to Ghaddafi and Jalloud had to postpone the coup against King Idris to go hear her sing. He is no fan of Ghaddafi.

"I went to Damas as a little kid. At the border, there was a large gate with the sign 'One Arab Nation

Forever.' I asked my father, 'What do they mean by that?' But he said to ignore it: 'It means nothing.' To me, 'One Arab Nation' existed because of Oum Koulsoum, Abdel Wahab and Abdel Halim Hafez."

When Abdel Halim Hafez died in middle age, many people committed suicide to be with him. One Arab Nation. He finishes his share of the Mateus and stares at the band with a slight buzz. To him, the pre-war era was before Zouheir Mohsen's death. It has nothing to do with the Egyptian Elvis Presley, Abdel Halim Hafez. "$15 minimum after 10 o'clock," the little sign on the table reminds him. It's worth it.

The news hit the city at night. The next day, he got his first look at the man's face. Photographs of Zouheir Mohsen at sixteen, Zouheir Mohsen with wife and children, Zouheir Mohsen with Palestinian, Lebanese and Arab leaders. Zouheir Mohsen surrounded by his armed troops. Zouheir Mohsen and Zouheir Mohsen, in French and Arabic newspapers, on wall posters and handout flyers. The name came in short bursts, snatched from harried street corner conversations. Zouheir Mohsen.

"What's happening," He asked.

"Zouheir Mohsen was just killed."

His wife translated perfunctorily, with a worried look on her face. People scattered; at beachside cafés, patrons got up to leave; a few took out their pocket radios. Crowds gathered, dispersed. He tailed his wife, who wasn't his wife yet, only a girl who took him to Rauche to eat roasted corn. In the temporarily peaceful city, Zouheir Mohsen had just been killed.

"Who's Zouheir Mohsen?"

"Leader of Saika. The bastard!" His wife was angry.

Saika was a military organization of the PLO, but controlled by Syria. Since the occupation of Lebanon by Syrian troops, Saika had become the most powerful fighting force.

"Who killed him?" he also wanted to know.

His question had no answer. In that place, there could be no definite culprit. The enemy—Israel, factions within the PLO, subordinates within Saika or Big Brother Syria are all possibilities. Not to mention those with personal motives: a rival in love; an impatient lender; a debtor with no place to hide; a wife or a mistress. Or maybe those with no motives, who didn't like how he looked. Later, it was revealed that Zouheir Mohsen was discreetly vacationing with his mistress in France, at Côte d'Azur. Coming home from gambling, he was shot four times by a stranger with a Banco submachine gun. Couldn't be saved at the hospital. The old vice of gambling. Saika leader hit the jackpot with Czech-made Skorpion bullets, near Scott Fitzgerald's old hotel perhaps. The Great Zouheir and Eden Roc—very poetic. He snorted once then rolled his eyes, fat oozing from the bullet holes on his bloated torso; his temporary Zelda was wailing like an Arab widow; the French doctor folded the stethoscope and shook his head. As to who the assassin was, even Hercule Poirot would just have to stroke his beard and smile.

His wife didn't need to know who killed him. She only knew there was trouble ahead. She discussed the situation curtly with passersby, pondered, then decided:

"We can't go home by car. Let's walk."

He felt superfluous, like a child, clueless about events. At that moment, it wouldn't do to ask dumb questions such as, "Is it far to walk?" His wife wore faded jeans, a gold-threaded shirt and sandals. Her hair was tucked behind her ears, bound with a brass-inlaid comb. Lugging a large rattan bag, she held a pack of Marlboros and a Bic lighter impatiently in her hands, as the sun set on Ramlet Al Baida. With the shimmering sea on one side, they walked toward town. He shuffled behind her and observed her lithe ass. Since it was not yet dark, he could make out the brand on her jeans, "UFO." By car or walking, wherever she went, his lot was to follow.

As they threaded through an alley, gunfire erupted. From in front or behind, near or far, all over the city

the guns called to each other. He listened attentively to sharp bursts doors away and to thin echoes from the suburbs. Sometimes the sounds were urgent and climactic; at other times they were mournful, scattered notes, a Beirut blues. He was a confused dancer, stuck on the dance floor without knowing the tune. His wife led hesitantly, out of sync with the beat. They rushed across boulevards and inched along the walls of apartment buildings. The popping sounds were toy-like—shots fired in panic, to intimidate not to kill. Absent were the hums of grenade launchers or the vibrations underfoot of artillery. Machine guns crackled sporadically. Those with machine guns handy swept bullets across the sky or down the block, for the hell of it. Those with only an AK also joined in. Your turn, then mine. The occasion was the assassination of Zouheir Mohsen. Understanding nothing, he followed wherever she led. On wide sidewalks crisscrossing the city, they staggered to the deadly syncopation. Two quick steps, then one slow step. It was fun following her; maybe one day I'll dare to make her my wife, he thought, while observing her measured steps ahead of him.

Turn left, then hang right. Although the street-level shops had their metal screens down, many lights were still on. Children peered from behind doors. Here and there, old men sat on stools in front of their houses. Young men gathered in groups of three, of five. Older people hurried along, as if late for dinner. It would have been a peaceful neighborhood if not for the sound of gunfire, the wrong soundtrack for the scene. Suddenly, at a large intersection, they ran into the musicians.

He was like a child discovering the basement door. In the middle of the unlit street were burning tires and oil drums, set as barricades. His wife stopped abruptly and entered the gate of an apartment complex. On the stoop, a guy in khaki pants and T-shirt sat with his hands on his knees. Behind him, in the shadow, came sounds of footsteps and excited conversations. He surveyed the dim fig-

ures walking around, weapons clanging by their sides. His wife traded words with someone. The guy on the stoop stood up, put his hands in his pocket and turned around to reveal a Soviet-made hand grenade strapped to his pants.

"Can't go home this way," his wife said.

"Who are these guys?" he asked.

"Lebanese. They're blocking the road. The Palestinians are leaving their camp tonight."

A figure appeared in the middle of the road, lit by the flickering light of the burning tires. A Heckler and Koch submachine gun, held in one hand, spat out a few compact bursts. His startled wife turned around. He saw no one shooting back. Since the Palestinians had a pretext to leave the camp armed, local bosses had to drag out their underlings to stake claims to their territories. Skirmishes were not likely to happen; the shooting was meant only to establish realms of control—in the same way dogs would piss on a lamp post. Although the ragged band came up with no tunes, it made enough of a racket to declare its presence, enough to create suspense as spent shells plopped on asphalt. His wife grabbed his hand suddenly.

"We have to go around the other way."

Her hand was clammy with sweat. He didn't pull his back or say anything.

"Watch out or you'll get shot," she tugged his hand.

"They're not shooting at me."

"Watch out for stray bullets," she raised her voice.

He let her hold his hand, pulling him along, and said nothing. Zouheir Mohsen had just been killed; war had begun. For him, the war began that night, at that hour, as she pulled his hand. Crisscrossing bullets on the street provided the mood music. Shoot some more! He wanted the way home barricaded by either the Syrian National Socialist Party or the Organization of Lebanese Communists. Only small arms were involved at that point. Later, should artillery be fired—who knows—she might even hug him.

He reaches out to his wife, who is sprawled at the other end of the U-shaped couch. To eat lying down, Roman style, is pretty enjoyable although no one would do it while hugging. At the next table, the two sisters have company: a middle-aged man, probably the older one's boyfriend. The younger one is there for propriety. While the petite women sucked on their soft drinks, the man whispered solemnly, perhaps about the number of rooms in his newly bought house. The restaurant is filled with Arabs, dressed elegantly for their Friday night. After fourteen years of bloodshed, those who have wandered to Orange County, on the other side of the globe, have come here to rediscover that pre-war atmosphere—when the sign "One Arab Nation Forever" at the border of Lebanon and Syria could confuse a child; before Zouheir Mohsen was assassinated; when a bus filled with Palestinian refugees could pass safely through Ain el Remaneh; and, even before that, when the Jordanian flag fluttered over Old Jerusalem.

Outside the restaurant, it is as dark as if the power has been cut. It's rural here, lest anyone should forget that Orange County is still hick country. He finds his way to the car, quietly surprised that the two of them had managed to finish the bottle. Another cup and he would have been drunk. He is still in a merry mood, not tired, his stomach not tied into knots, his temples not aching.

He praises himself for his moderation. From inside the restaurant, the music wafts out. Abdel Halim Hafez, with a haircut like the Vietnamese pop singer Che Linh and a boxer's nose, striking a haughty, artistic pose on a fuzzy, cheaply printed cassette cover. He remembers one night in Beirut, after two glasses of arak, he went out to his car singing an old French song to himself. Inside the empty restaurant, the polite waiter had praised him for his singing voice. Encouraged, he couldn't stop. It was proba-

bly the only time he had received such a compliment. The Lebanese are a kind-hearted and generous people.

"What song was he singing?" he asks his wife.

"That was the first time I heard it. It's not a familiar song."

"You don't know who it was?"

"No," his wife smiles, "the lyrics were 'Back home, even fire is heavenly...'"

"How can fire be heavenly?"

"Flame is hell: 'Oh, my homeland, even your hell is heavenly.' "

"Oh."

"You get nostalgic about home?" he asks.

His wife is still smiling:

"It's okay to be nostalgic every once in a while. The Arabs are like children; always thinking they were the best. They'd get together to hear Oum Koulsoum sing and the entire day would be gone. Now they're on the bottom and they can't understand why, so they cry and tear their hair out. Still, it's okay to be nostalgic every once in a while."

It's like drinking wine, a little bit for fun, but not too much to give you a headache. His wife is very tolerant tonight. The past, what's behind, *The Long Goodbye*, memories. Lyrics to an old song, "It's nothing. Time passes. You know. It doesn't matter..." It doesn't matter, although he does not sing it. His wife can only be so tolerant. She's not a waiter at a restaurant on Pigeon Beach in Beirut who could put up with his singing voice. Enough of soaking in that pre-war atmosphere. Let's not abuse it. Think about the past enough to amuse yourself, but don't retch over it. Home or exile, that sour vomit smell can't be made fragrant with mood music. He says vaguely to his wife:

"Where can you get a gimlet around here at this hour?"

Translated by Linh Dinh